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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of perceived similarity, behavioral confirmation of sex role stereotypes, and victim gender on attributions of blame and derogation of the victim. College students (N=120) participated in a 2x2x2 factorial design manipulating victim gender, victim behavior (active/passive), and personal similarity (young student/older clerk). Subjects read a vignette describing a police report of an assault and completed questionnaires measuring subjects' perceptions of the crime, attributions of blame, attributions to the victim, and attributions to the attacker. The results revealed that attacks of high similarity victims were perceived as less frequent than those of low similarity victims. Active males and passive females were perceived as having more frerquent attacks than passive males or active females. The victimization of similar females and dissimilar males was perceived as being more serious than the victimization of dissimilar females or similar males. Subjects assigned more blame to the attacker when the victim was passive rather than active. Dissimilar victims, female victims, and active victims were more likely to be blamed for their attacks. Overall, no one attributional model was clearly supported. (NB)

VICTIM SEX, PERSONAL SIMILARITY, AND VICTIM BEHAVIOR: A CASE OF VIOLATED EXPECTATIONS

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Attribution theory is most often concerned with causal inferences, or why people see a person or situation as being the cause of a behavior. Heider (1958) suggests that humans have a desire to ascribe a cause to an action and thereby derive some meaning from it. Moreover, the observer may attribute the cause to the environment (situational attribution) or to the person (dispositional attribution). Causality is important to us because it helps us predict future occurrences more accurately. Most of the attribution literature from the 1950's to the present concedes that attribution is a top-down process; that is, the perceiver brings cognitive "baggage" to whatever he/she perceives in his environment. Thus, the perceiver brings all sorts of cognitive schema to his experience, imbuing his experience with meaning (Heider, 1958). Furthermore, this cognitive baggage alters and guides behavior in addition to guiding perception; it allows us to "fill in the blanks" and make inferences based on limited information (Bruner, 1959).

One very important type of cognitive baggage we carry with us is sex role expectations, or sex role stereotypes. Sex role expectations help us decide how to interact with a man or woman, based on our expectancies of male or female behavior. For example, one common sex role expectation we have is that women are sensitive. When we see a mother bending over her child's scraped knee, this expectation allows us to infer that she will probably comfort the

child. Other expectations of men and women, however, are not as inocuous. As Janoff-Bulman & Frieze (1983) suggest, women are often thought of as victims; indeed, the study of victimization tends to focus on women. In contrast, men are most often seen as competent and powerful (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972). If these views are the pervasive standards we carry and use to guide our behavior towards males and females, as Broverman et.al suggest, then there is a potential for differences in perceptions of male and female victims. The ways we perceive victims (on the basis of sex) may have a great deal to do with our interactions with them.

Broverman, et.al found that both men and women have ingrained sex role stereotypes in their self concept. In addition, views of the ideal male/female are extremely close to sex role stereotypes. They suggest that observers tend to view others as more stereotypically masculine or feminine. This may affect attributions because the actor's behaviors may be more likely to be viewed dispositionally, as a characteristic of the actor's gender. Masculine characteristics include competence and control, while feminine characteristics include warmth and expressiveness. If a woman is viewed as being extremely feminine, she would also be expected to be very passive and compliant because those are traits associated with femininity. The sex role ideals will serve as a basis for expectations and for comparison. Sex role stereotypes allow people to gauge how

typically male or female a target is, or how typical they themselves are. Once an observer has established a belief or expectancy about a target, this belief may guide the processing of information relevant to the target.

Snyder (1984) suggests that we tend to reconstruct past behavior of targets so that it is concordant with our beliefs about the target. One way to do this is by selective recall of relevant information; the observer merely isolates the particular information he needs and screens out any inconsistent information. For example, if a woman is attacked, the observer may focus on her poor judgement and ignore the fact that the street was well-lit. Another way to confirm beliefs is to selectively recall experiences where the belief is confirmed. In this case, the observer would remember an attack in which the woman was raped instead of an attack where the woman thwarted her assailant. Either way, behaviors which are consistent with previous beliefs are confirmed. Once these behaviors are confirmed, the perceiver has a blueprint for future interactions and behaviors with the target. The observer may construe this target as a "victim", which will in turn guide the observer's behavior toward that target so that she acts like a victim. The target thus confirms the observer's belief, and more importantly, his behavior may guide the target's own perceptions so that she comes to view herself as a "victim." This may also be thought of as a self fufilling prophesy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Heider (1958) suggests that we tend to see the connections between an actor's disposition and his behavior more readily because they seem to "fit" better; that is, one can draw a more direct causal inference about an actor from his behavior. Many times it is harder for an observer to see how situational variables affect targets' behaviors and take them into account when formulating causal inferences. Lee Ross (1977) has termed this tendency to focus on dispositional variables the fundamental attribution error. The fundamental attribution error suggests that we tend to see others' behaviors as being more dispositional and our own behavior as being more situational; that is, we are better able to see how other factors come into play when we examine our own behavior. Ross suggests that this is because have access to more information in regard to ourselves, and our information about others is limited. Unfortunately, this fundamental attribution error may sometimes lead us astray.

Lerner (1978) states in his just world hypothesis that there is a need for observers and victims alike to attribute a cause or blame for tragic occurrences. When there is an obvious external cause, blame will be focused on that cause. When there is no available cause for a tragedy, however, blame will shift to the victim. Derogation of the victim occurs when the victim suffers an injustice and receives no compensation, or if he/she suffers and the perpetrator goes unpunished. The

underlying assumption is that "people get what they deserve" and the notion that if misfortune befalls them unexpectedly, the world must not be an orderly place. Lerner proposes the observer can focus on character traits or behaviors in attributing blame; moreover, actors who are behaviorally blamed are perceived as more attractive and derogated less. He also suggests that in situations with severe consequences, there may be a desire to derogate the personal character of the victim because his/her behavior is beyond reproach. Therefore, women who take precautions and are still raped are designated "tramps" or said to have been "asking for it." In either explanation the attribution of blame is to the character of the victim.

Janoff-Bulman (1979) distinguishes between characterological and behavioral blame in her study of female rape victims. She states that characterological blame is blame that focuses on the dispositions of the person, and is thus more enduring and difficult to alter. Behavioral blame, in contrast, is blame that focuses on the actions of the person, and is thus easier to change. An example of characterological blame is the mugging victim who exclaims, "I deserve this; I'm just a bad person." An example of characterological blame is the victim who says, "I shouldn't have been walking on an unlit street; I won't do that again." The implications of characterological versus behavioral blame are important. With behavioral blame, the victim does maintain some control over her

situation and her future actions. She can change her actions to insure that she will not be victimized again. Victims who blame themselves characterologically, however, tend to believe that they brought this occurrence on themselves through their personality, and that it can happen again because they are the "victim type." Unfortunately, the sex role stereotype of women as victims reinforces the characterological blame of women and maintains the cycle of victimization.

Observers can use sex role expectations to guide their attributions of blame by determining whether or not the victim engaged in sex appropriate behavior. Using this model, females will be blamed due to their dispositions while males will be blamed for their behaviors. For example, the female who is mugged and submits may be seen as acting in a typical manner for a woman; thus, she is blamed for "not fighting back." In contrast, a man who gets mugged and does not submit may be seen as reacting as a man should, but the focus will be on his behavior ("he couldn't beat the other guy up"). In this way, women should be more likely to be blamed characterologically, while men should be more likely to be blamed behaviorally.

Howard (1984) found that more blame is attributed to the character of women while more blame is attributed to the behavior of men. Moreover, she found that women are expected, and expect to be, the victims of assault more often than men. Howard suggests that victimization is

viewed as a feminine experience, where men are blamed for deviating from their sex role stereotype while women are blamed for conforming to their sex role stereotype. But the difference in types of attributions may be due in part to the role of behavioral confirmation in the creation and perpetuation of sex role stereotypes. In the case of the "women as victims" stereotype, social norms and expectations may encourage a woman to be passive or submissive. When she is victimized, she is then blamed for "not screaming" or because she was "looking for trouble." The stereotype of victim is confirmed, and the stereotype is continued. If a man is attacked and defends himself from an attacker, however, he confirms the stereotype of competent male and receives no derogation or blame. What happens when sex role expectations are not confirmed? If Howard's results are any indication, we should expect more derogation and overall blame of the victim when he/she violates sex role stereotypes.

What happens in a case where an actor's behavior is inconsistent with the observer's expectation? Kulik (1983) suggests that a behavior is more salient if it is inconsistent with previous beliefs that the actor is the type of person from whom to expect that behavior. If the expectations of the observer are not confirmed, the inconsistent behavior is attributed to the situation and not the actor. For example, Ann is a passive person. If a mugger attacks Ann and she punches him in the mouth, we

say that Ann punched the mugger because she was defending herself, not because she is a violent person. Snyder (1984) suggests that when an observer is presented with inconsistent information, the observer can then postulate a new belief or expectancy about the target, which must then be behaviorally confirmed. So if we decide that perhaps Ann is a mean person, we would have to see her behave in a mean way in order to confirm this new belief.

In the case of a woman who is attacked and does not defend herself, her character would not be called into question because she fufills the sex role expectation of passive, compliant female. Her behavior confirms the observer's belief that women are passive. But what if this female was attacked and defended herself by breaking the attacker's jaw? In this situation, the female victim did not confirm the sex role expectation of passivity; furthermore, she behaved in a violent way. Because this information about her violent behavior contradicts the expectation of passivity, the observer's attention should be focused on creating a new belief about this woman, according to Snyder (1984). Moreover, the new belief will most likely be a dispositional one (based on the violent behavior) which must then be confirmed. If there are suspicions that the behavior is typical of this woman, this experience will verify this new belief. So the observer decides that this woman must have been "looking for trouble" because she acted "like a troublemaker". Sex role

stereotypes, then, provide the observer with a very rich, salient set of expectations for actors, which can be behaviorally confirmed.

The behavioral confirmation process is also affected by the perceived similarity of the victim to the observer. Shaver (1970) defines similarity as the extent to which a person shares common attitudes, beliefs, status, and values with another. He proposes that attributions of blame are determined by the degree of personal similarity between the observer and target. In turn, personal similarity affects blame avoidance and harm avoidance. In blame avoidance, the relationship between an observer and the victim is such where the observer believes himself to be implicated in the victim's suffering. If the observer perceives herself as being personally similar to the target, she will attribute blame away from the victim and towards an external cause. This is due to the obsrver's fear that someday he may be judged by his own standards. For example, a college coed who did not walk her roommate home late at night and later discovers she was attacked may blame the lack of security, bad lighting, or poor layout of the campus. Shaver terms attributions which reduce threat "defensive" attributions. A defensive attribution occurs when an observer attributes blame to chance or external causes because he/she cannot deny personal similarity, or when the observer denies personal similarity and attributes blame to the victim (Shaver, 1975).

In harm avoidance, the relationship between the observer and the victim is indirect. If the observer views the victim as being personally dissimilar, she will attribute blame to the actor. This is because the situation is threatening. In order to ward off the possibility of this harm occurring to her, the observer must believe the victim was somehow responsible for his own fate. An example of this would be a college coed who learns of a woman who was attacked on campus. She may attribute the blame to the victim's lack of judgement. The previous scenarios are both examples of defensive attributions.

Thornton (1984) extends Shaver's (1975) defensive attribution theory by introducing a distinction between behavioral and characterolological attributions of blame. Thornton (1984) suggests that observers may be more likely to attribute behavioral blame when blame avoidance is involved. Characterological blame would impugne the observer's character because s/he is similar to the victim. Should this fate befall the observer, the personal deservingness of the observer would come into question because s/he is the same type of person.

Attributions of blame are less likely with a personally similar victim; the observer is more likely to identify with the victim, and thus, not derogate him/her because he is threatened by the possibility of this fate befalling him. Behavioral blame would be expected to be

attributed to a personally similar victim, again, because of the cognitive threat. Behavioral blame also distinguishes why the similar victim was attacked while the observer was not -- the victim did something wrong -- and implies the observer can somehow control his fate by not engaging in these actions.

In contrast, characterological blame would be expected in a situation where the observer perceives himself as personally dissimilar -- the observer can attribute blame to the victim because he/she is unlike him. External attributions of blame would not be likely to occur in harm avoidance because the observer wants to cognitively protect him/herself from the possibility of a chance occurrence. If blame is attributed to an external factor outside the observer's control, he will have no power over his fate.

Defensive attribution occurs when the observer is threatened and may serve to explain why women attributed more characterological blame to female victims and men attributed more behavioral blame to male victims in Howard's (1984) study. Perhaps the female observers were threatened by the sex role expectation of attack and so attributed the blame to a flaw in the female victim's character. Since a woman's sex role stereotype is that of submissiveness, any behavior which could be construed as aggressive would be taboo and would force women to react passively to an attack. With the options limited, the alternative to behavioral blame (since both the observer

and victim would be expected to react similarly), would have to be focused on the character of the victim in order to lessen cognitive threat to the observer. Men, on the other hand, are expected to react to attack defensively and so any blame would be attributed to their actions, not their character, because they confirmed expectations.

Personal similarity may be related to the extent to which an observer views the victim as being typical of his/her gender. A man who views a football player as similar to himself would probably not view a ballerina in the same way. A target who verifies the sex role expectation of his/her gender may be perceived as more similar to the observer (by the observer), and thus, motivate defensive attributions which would explain Howard's (1984) results in same sex attrributions of blame. In the same vein, Walster (1966) suggests that if one perceives oneself as typical of a group or identifies with it in some way, any harm which befalls that group should, in theory, cognitively threaten the individual. If it is plausible for harm to befall an observer, the individual would seek to cognitively protect herself, according to Walster.

This study examined the effects of perceived similarity, behavioral confirmation of sex role stereotypes, and victim sex on attributions of blame and derogation of the victim. It was predicted that behavioral blame would be attributed to personally similar victims,

while characterological blame would be attributed to personally dissimilar victims. Women should receive more characterological blame, while men should receive more behavioral blame, replicating Howard (1984). In addition, it was hypothesized that victims who behaviorally confirm sex role expectations and are perceived as similar would be behaviorally blamed. Victims who do not confirm sex role expectations and are perceived as dissimilar from the victim should be blamed characterologically.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred and twenty subjects were recruited from introductory level psychology courses at Allegheny College. Subjects received extra credit for experimental participation.

Design

A 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design manipulating victim sex (male vs. female), victim behavior (active vs. passive), and personal similarity (young student vs. older clerk) was used.

Dependent Measures

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of background and comprehension questions which provided a cover story. The remaining questions measured subjects' perceptions of the crime, attributions of blame (characterological, behavioral, and external), attributions to the attacker, and attributions to the victim. All questions used a seven point scale, and the questions assessing comprehension, characterological, behavioral, and external blame were single summed scores, as was seriousness of crime. (See Appendix J for a copy of the questionnaire).

Procedure

Subjects were run in groups ranging in size from one to fifteen. At the beginning of each session, the experimenter passed out the vignettes (see author for the full vignettes) and asked subjects to keep them face down in front of them. The experimenter then told subjects that they were participating in an experiment on reading retention and that they should read the vignettes slowly and carefully. When subjects finished reading, they flipped the vignettes over and raised their hand for a questionnaire (see author for a complete copy of the questionnaire). In all the vignettes the description of events was the same; the vignette was a police report of an assault. The officer asked background questions about the victim's occupation and age, and asked how the attack took place. The victim provided the narrative of the assault and described the attack. The vignette was adapted from the vignette used in Howard's (1984) study.

Sex of the victim was manipulated by the use of "Mr." or "Miss" before the victim's surname. In the similar condition, the victim was a twenty year old college student and research assistant. In the dissimilar condition, the victim was a thirty year old clerk in a department store. Victim behavior was manipulated within the scenario. In the active condition, a description of the victim's attempt to thwart the attacker and flee was added. The victim first

attempted to scream, kick the attacker in the chest, and then flee. Passive victims did not resist the attacker. In all conditions the outcome was the same; the victim was robbed and sustained broken ribs.

When all subjects had completed the questionnaires, the experimenter asked them to place their questionnaire face down on top of the vignette. Subjects were then debriefed as to the true nature of the experiment and its manipulations, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

RESULTS

The questionnaire was analyzed using a three way factorial ANOVA. Each question was analyzed separately, with the exception of questions assessing behavioral, characterological, or external blame and comprehension questions. These questions were given a single summed score. This yielded 26 dependent variables.

Background and manipulation checks showed no significant differences between subjects.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

On a measure of victim similarity, observers in the high similarity condition viewed themselves as more similar to the victim (M= 3.88), while observers in the low similarity condition saw themselves as less similar (M= 3.27), $F(1,112) = 4.70$, $p<.05$.

Perceptions of the Crime

There was a significant main effect for similarity on a measure of frequency of crime, as well as an interaction between victim sex and victim behavior on the measure of frequency. In addition, there was an interaction between similarity and victim sex on a measure of seriousness of crime.

TABLE 1

Background Information and Manipulation Checks

		Comprehension		Victim Similarity		Victim Common	
Source of Variation	df	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	<1	<1	11.41	4.7*	3.67	1.06
Victim Sex (B)	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Victim Behavior (C)	1	1.88	3.37	3.67	1.51	<1	<1
AB	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
AC	1	<1	<1	2.41	<1	3.01	<1
BC	1	<1	<1	8.01	3.30	9.08	2.61
ABC	1	<1	<1	1.01	<1	5.21	1.50
S/ABC	112	<1		2.43		3.48	

*$p < .05$

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Attacks were perceived as less frequent for high similarity victims ($\underline{M}$= 4.8) than for low similarity victims ($\underline{M}$= 5.28), $F(1,112) = 4.04$, $\underline{p}<.05$. Also, active male victims and passive female victims were perceived as having more frequent attacks ($\underline{M}$= 5.36, 5.23) than passive male victims ($\underline{M}$= 4.66) or active females ($\underline{M}$= 4.93), $F(1,112) = 4.65$, $\underline{p}<.05$.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

On a measure of seriousness, similar females and dissimilar males were perceived as having more serious crimes ($\underline{M}$=8.6, 8.77) than similar males or dissimilar females ($\underline{M}$= 6.87, 7.1), $F(1,112) = 11.95$, $\underline{p}<.05$.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Victim Attributions

There were significant main effects for each of the independent variables on attributions of victim blame. On a measure of victim blame, it was found that more victim blame was attributed to dissimilar victims ($\underline{M}$= 4.61) than similar victims ($\underline{M}$= 3.97), $F(1,112) = 5.53$, $\underline{p}<.05$.

TABLE 2

Perceptions of Crime

		Frequency		Personal Threat		Worry		Seriousness	
Source of Variation	df	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	6.53	4.05*	<1	<1	10.21	3.67	1.12	<1
Victim Sex (B)	1	<1	<1	6.53	3.21	3.67	1.32	<1	<1
Victim Behavior (C)	1	1.12	<1	2.13	1.05	<1	<1	9.63	1.33
AB	1	2.70	1.67	5.63	2.77	<i	<1	86.7	11.95*
AC	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
BC	1	7.5	4.65*	<1	<1	3.01	1.08	16.13	2.22
ABC	1	<1	<1	2.13	1.05	3.01	1.08	8.53	1.18
S/ABC	112	1.61		2.03		2.78		7.25	

*$p < .05$

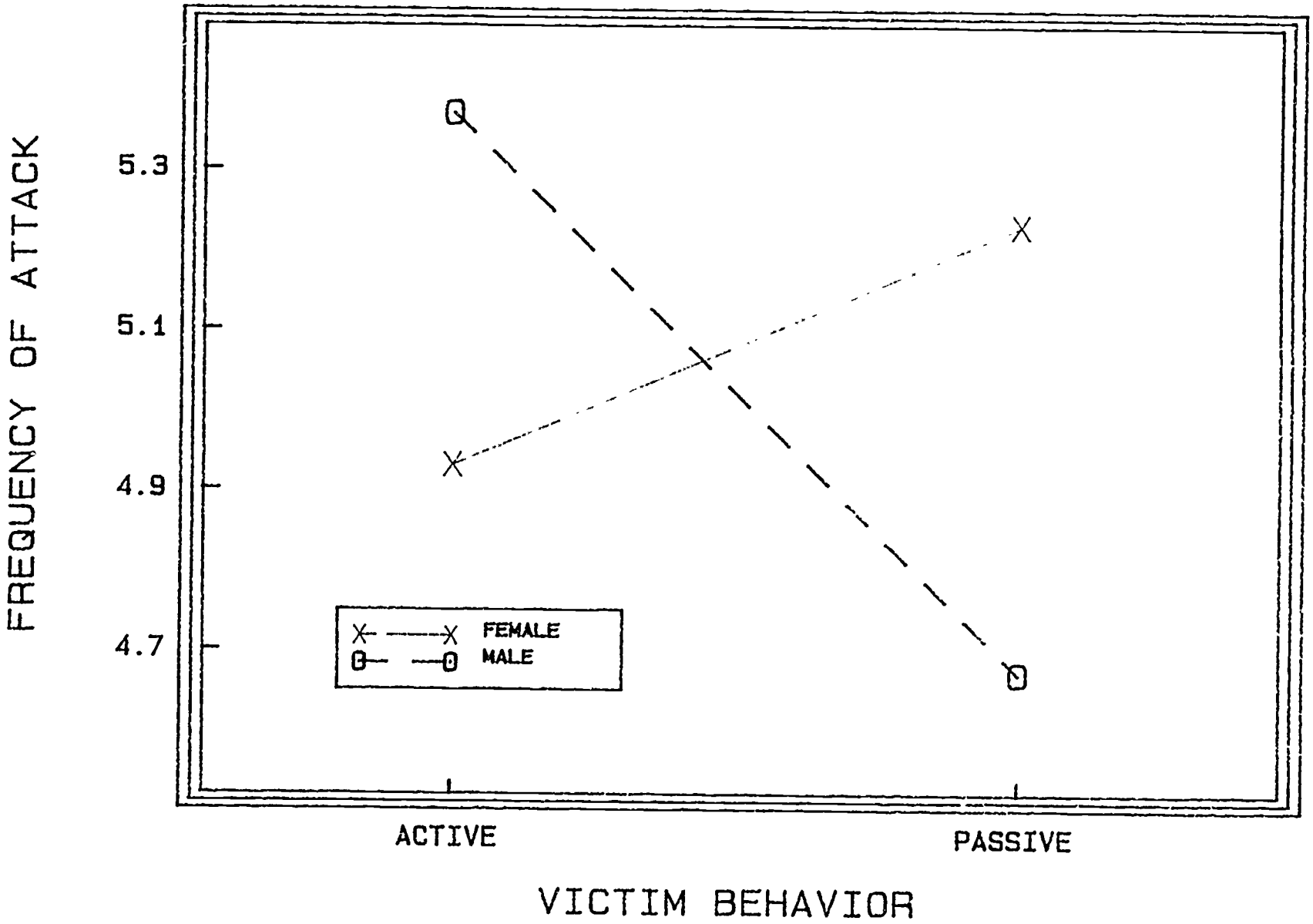

FIGURE 1. INTERACTION BETWEEN VICTIM SEX AND VICTIM BEHAVIOR FOR PERCEIVED FREQUENCY OF MUGGING

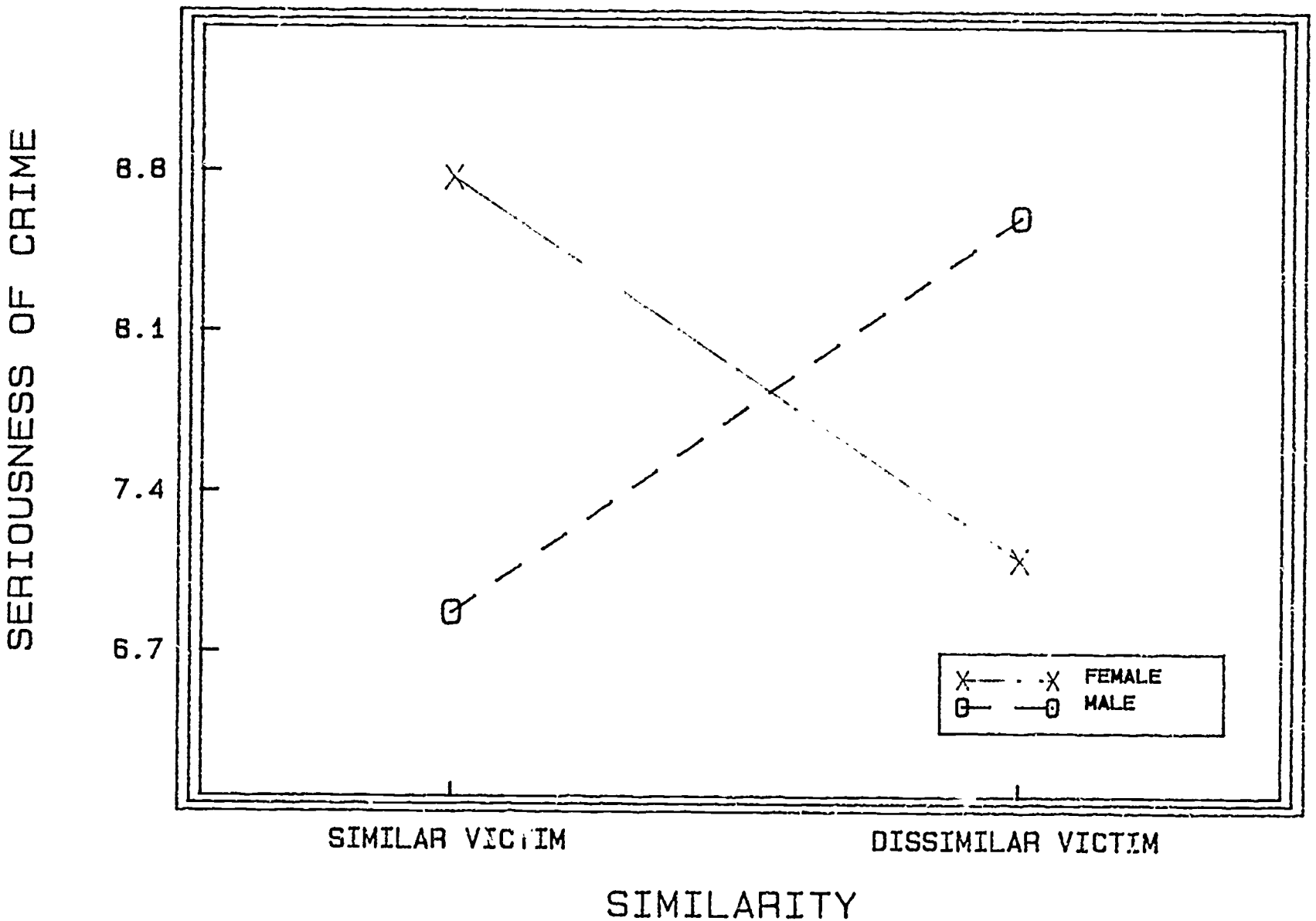

FIGURE 2. INTERACTION BETWEEN SIMILARITY AND VICTIM SEX FOR PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS OF THE CRIME

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Female victims received more victim blame (M= 4.58) than male victims (M= 4.0), $F(1,112)= 4.46$, $p<.05$. More victim blame was also attributed to active victims (M= 4.58) than passive victims (M= 4.0), $F(1,112)= 4.46$, $p<.05$.

Attributions of Blame

There were significant main effects for each of the independent variables and an interaction between all three variables on attributions of blame.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Dissimilar victims received more behavioral blame (M= 29.48) than similar victims (M= 27.15), $F(1,112)= 6.14$, $p<.05$. Females victims received more characterological blame (M= 50.78) than male victims (M= 46.02), $F(1,112)= 9.52$, $p<.05$. Passive victims received more external blame (M=30.1) than active victims (M= 27.22), $F(1,112)= 9.54$, $p<.05$. In addition, there was an interaction among similarity, victim sex, and victim behavior on a measure of external blame.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

TABLE 3

Victim Attributions

		V. Blame		V. Provoke		V. Prevent		V. Precaution	
Source of Variations	df	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	12.67	5.53*	6.07	2.78	6.08	1.96	<1	<1
Victim Sex (B)	1	10.21	4.45*	1.88	<1	1.88	<1	2.7	1.47
Victim Behavior (C)	1	10.21	4.45*	7.01	3.21	9.08	2.92	2.7	1.47
AB	1	<1	<1	1.01	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
AC	1	3.01	1.31	3.01	1.38	3.67	1.18	<1	<1
BC	1	<1	<1	1.41	<1	<1	<1	0	0
ABC	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
S/ABC	112	2.29		2.18		3.10		1.84	

*$p < .05$

TABLE 4

Attributions of Blame

		External		Behavioral		Characterological	
Source of Variation	df	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	20.01	<1	163.33	6.14*	14.74	<1
Victim Sex (B)	1	14.02	<1	<1	<1	681.65	9.52*
Victim Behavior (C)	1	249.41	9.54*	80.04	3.01	192.57	2.69
AB	1	7.99	<1	2.7	<1	26.10	<1
AC	1	<1	<1	22.53	<1	218.64	3.05
BC	1	10.19	<1	2.12	<1	86.66	1.21
ABC	1	151.87	5.81*	67.51	2.54	83.35	1.16
S/ABC	112	26.13		26.60		71.6	

*$p < .05$

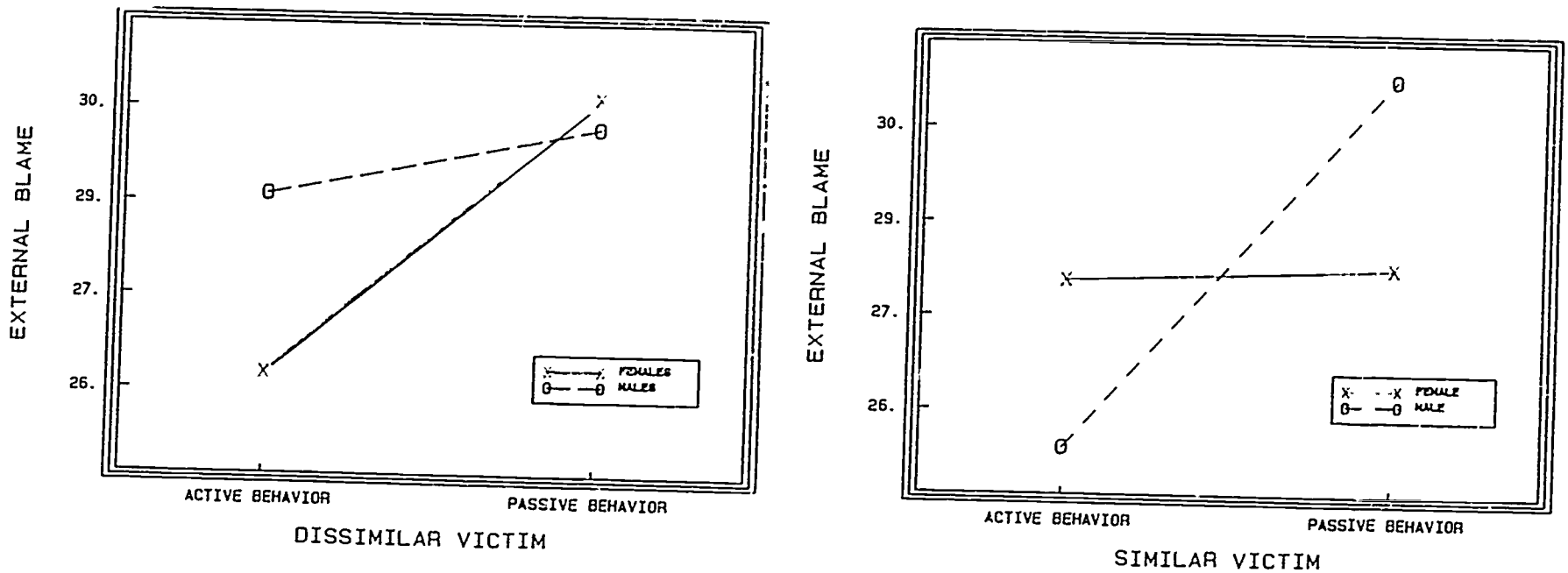

FIGURE 3. INTERACTION AMONG SIMILARITY, VICTIM SEX, AND VICTIM BEHAVIOR FOR ATTRIBUTIONS OF EXTERNAL BLAME

In the similar condition, passive males received more external blame (M= 31.27) than active males (M= 25.4). Female victims did not differ significantly on the basis of behavior (M= 28.06 for active females, 28.27 for passive females). In the dissimilar condition, passive females received more external blame (M= 30.67) than active females (M= 26.27), $F(1,112) = 5.81, p<.05$.

Attacker Attributions

There was a main effect and an interaction between similarity and victim sex for attacker attributions.

INSERT TABLE 5

It was found that the attacker was more to blame when the victim was passive (M= 6.65) than when the victim was active (M= 6.33), $F(1,112) = 5.49$, $p<.05$. On a measure of attacker advantage in the situation, there was an interaction between similarity and victim sex.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

It was found that the attacker was viewed as taking more advantage of the situation when the victim was a similar male (M= 6.67) or a dissimilar female (M= 6.57) rather than a dissimilar male (M= 6.1) or a similar female (M= 6.4), $F(1,112) = 5.11, p<.05$. All other measures failed to yield

significant differences among subjects.

TABLE 5

Attacker Attributions

		Attacker Blame		Attacker Reason		Attacker Situation	
Source of Variation	df	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1.20	1.52
Victim Sex (B)	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Victim Behavior (C)	1	3.01	5.49*	2.41	<1	<1	<1
AB	1	1.01	1.84	3.01	<1	4.03	5.11*
AC	1	<1	<1	5.21	1.17	<1	<1
BC	1	<1	<1	1.41	<1	<1	<1
ABC	1	<1	<1	12.67	2.85	1.20	1.52
S/ABC	112	<1		4.44		<1	

*$p < .05$

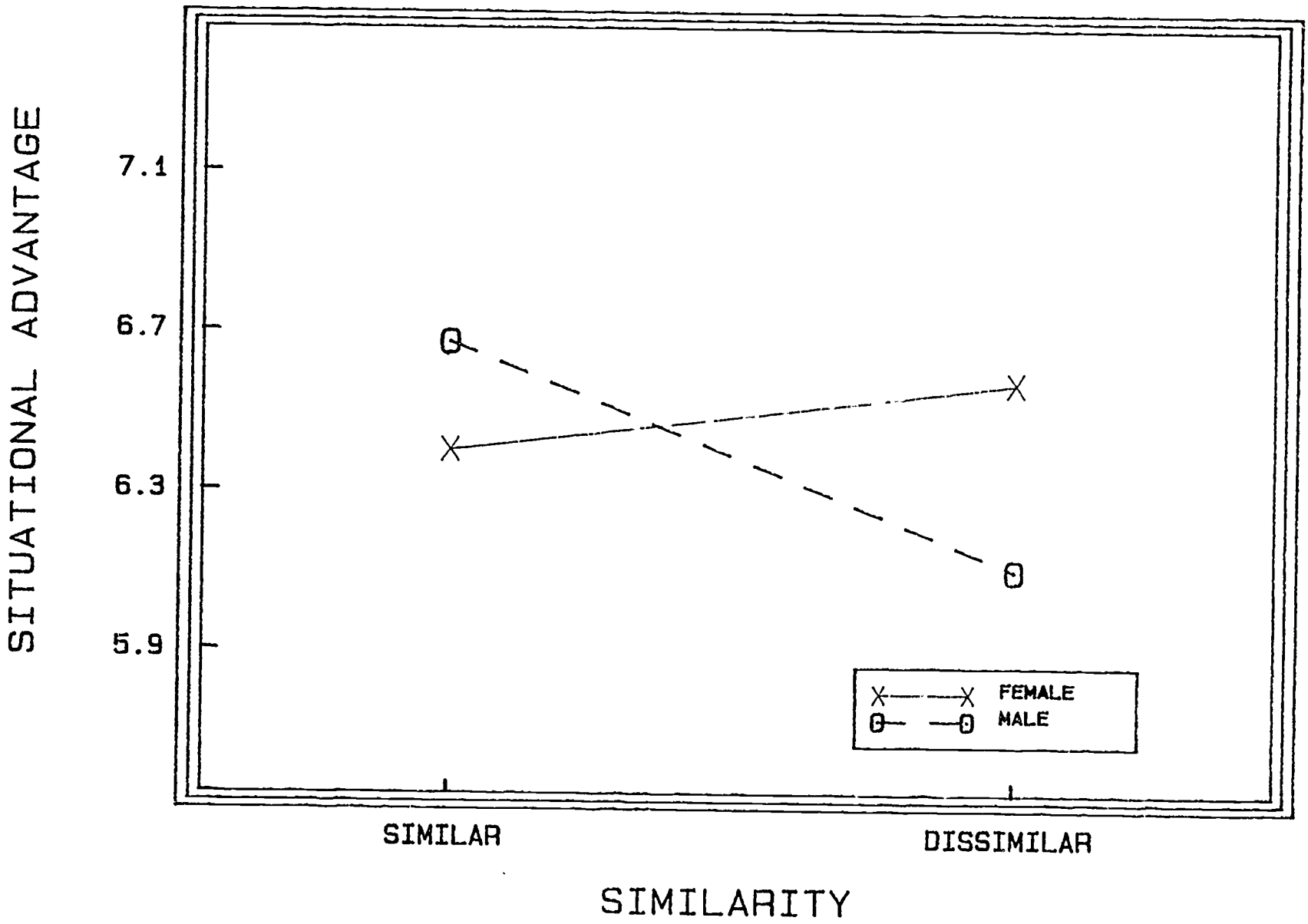

FIGURE 4. INTERACTION BETWEEN SIMILARITY AND VICTIM SEX FOR A MEASURE OF THE ATTACKER TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION

DISCUSSION

Background and manipulation checks showed no significant differences between subjects in reading comprehension and perceived similarity, indicating that the manipulations operated as expected. A summed measure of comprehension, which consisted of eight questions concerning understanding of the vignette, failed to yield significant differences between groups. Furthermore, subjects viewed themselves as similar to the victim in the similar condition, although they did not view themselves as having much in common with the victim. This raised a concern on the part of the experimenters that subjects did not infer that they had the same beliefs, attitudes, and values as the victim. Shaver (1970, 1975) defines personal similarity as the degree to which the observer believes himself to have the same values, etc. as the target. In this study, subjects were not specifically told they shared attitudes; they were assumed to have inferred this from the description of the victim's age, interests, and occupation. Nonetheless, subjects still considered themselves very similar or dissimilar to the victim, depending on the experimental condition.

Perceptions of the Crime

Measures of perceptions of the crime revealed no

effects for personal threat or worry. Attacks of high similarity victims were perceived as less frequent than those of low similarity victims. This suggests that subjects were somehow distancing themselves from the victims, which seems to support Shaver's (1975) harm avoidance model and Walster's (1966) similarity model. It also seems to support Lerner's (1978) just world model, which asserts that observers assume that "people get what they deserve". In addition, active males and passive females were perceived as having more frequent attacks than passive males or active females. This finding is in keeping with Heider's (1958) salience argument, which states that whichever factor seems most salient to the observer will be perceived as the causal agent. It also supports Ross' (1977) fundamental attribution error because the behavior and presumed disposition of the victim is pivotal in the perception of frequency of attack. Finally, the victimization of similar females and dissimilar males was perceived as being more serious than the victimization of dissimilar females or similar males. In the case of similar females, it could be that the subjects viewed the victim as being someone very like them and were cognitively threatened. This would motivate defensive attributions (harm avoidance) according to Shaver's (1975) model. In the case of dissimilar males, it may be that subjects did not feel cognitively threatened and thus were free to rate the dissimilar male's attack as more serious. Presumably,

the dissimilar male victim was seen as being different, and may have been viewed as older, less spry, and possibly less able to defend himself. In this way, it would be perceived as a more serious attack.

Attacker Attributions

Subjects assigned more blame to the attacker when the victim was passive rather than active. Again, this suggests that the observers attributed blame to what was most salient in the attack. If the victim was passive and did little to provoke the attack, the attacker must have had a greater role in the mugging. This is consistent with Taylor & Fiske's (1978) top of the head model. In addition, the attacker was viewed as taking advantage of the situation more when the victim was a similar male or dissimilar female. It is possible that the similar male victim was perceived as being fairly competent and dominant, so that an attacker would have asserted more aggression and taken greater advantage of the situation in order to overpower the victim. In the case of the dissimilar female, subjects may have perceived her as being more helpless and thus judged the attacker as taking advantage of the situation.

Victim Attributions

There were significant main effects for each of the independent variables on an overall measure of victim

blame, although measures assessing victim provocation, victim prevention, and victim precaution failed to yield any significant results. It was found that dissimilar victims, female victims, and active victims were more likely to be blamed for their attacks. On measures of specific types of blame, it was found that dissimilar victims were more likely to be blamed behaviorally than similar victims, while female victims were more likely to be blamed characterologically than males. Passive victims were more likely to be blamed externally than active victims. There was also an interaction among similarity, sex, and behavior for the external blame measure. Thus, the effects obtained in the overall victim blame measure are parallelled in the characterological, behavioral, and external blame measures.

Dissimilar victims were blamed for their behavior which contradicts Thorton's (1984) and Shaver's (1975) attributional models. Possibly, dissimilar victims may be blamed for their behavior because of an unwillingness on the part of the observer to attribute dispositional blame to the victim. By attributing behavioral blame, the subject may infer that the dissimilar victim was somehow at fault, but assume the victim will correct his behavior in the future. Although this seems to contradict Ross' fundamental attribution error, this finding does suggest that subjects are willing and able to weigh situational variables in attributing blame.

The main effect of victim sex on a measure of characterological blame indicated that the character of female victims was seen as the cause for their attacks, providing some suuport for Howard's (1984) study. This finding also support the notion that females are expected to be passive victims that have an ingrained flaw which allows them to be easy targets.

External blame was attributed to passive victims, which suggests that subjects were reluctant to attribute complete blame to a victim when they could avoid doing so. This is in keeping with Lerner's (1978) just world model, which states that observers will tend not to attribute blame to the victim when there are other possible alternatives. This data, in conjunction with the data for victim precaution, victim prevention, and victim provocation seems to suggest that subjects did not want to blame the victim entirely for the attack, but did weigh situational as well as dispositional and behavioral variables. The fact that external blame was attributed to passive victims suggests that active behavior was salient to observers, and so when victims were active, the observer's focus shifted to the victim. Passive victims' environments were presumably more salient, and so external attributions were more common for passive victims. This suggests support for Taylor & Fiske's (1978) top of the head model.

The dependent measure for external blame yielded an

interaction among similarity, sex, and behavior. In the dissimilar condition, passive male and female victims both received greater attributions of external blame. This is due to the salience of the environment over the victim (Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Heider, 1958). Dissimilar, active victims received less external blame, with dissimilar active females receiving the least external blame. In the case of the dissimilar, active male, it may be that the environment/situation of this victim wre viewed as more salient because of age and status. Perhaps subjects were more willing to take situational factors (the victim's age, the attacker's strength) into consideration in order to provide an "out" for the victim who failed to meet sex role expectations. Conversely, perhaps subjects were less willing to attribute external blame when a dissimilar, active female was attacked because she was "tough" and did not fufill the stereotype of the passive female victim.

In the similar condition, subjects may have felt they had a basis of comparison and felt more confident in their attributions. Subjects assigned more external blame to passive, similar males, which again suggests that subjects were willing to weigh situational variables. This fits with Shaver's (1975) blame avoidance model and Lerner's (1978) just world model. Similar, active males received less external blame, presumably because their actions were salient and focused attention on the actor. In addition, active males may have been perceived as somehow

contributing to their attacks because they were acting in a "macho" way. In either case, the attention is centered on the actor and attributions of blame are directed to him. Similar females were blamed equally, regardless of behavior. This suggests some support for Howard's (1984) assertion that women are blamed for conforming to their sex role. The similar female's behavior is irrelevant to attributing blame. Examination of the data suggests that the simlar female victim and her environment were equally salient to subjects. While female victims receive more characterological blame and overall blame, the equal salience of both situation and disposition seems to show that women will be blamed for their attacks based on either or both factors. Women should be more likely to be blamed for "being passive" and/or "walking in a bad neighborhood." Either cause is enough, since women are expected to be attacked.

Overall, it appears that no one attributional model was clearly supported. There was partial support for Shaver (1970, 1975), Taylor & Fiske (1978), Lerner's (1978) models, and Howard's (1984) sex stereotyping model. One important issue that should be addressed in future studies is the manipulation of personal similarity. It would be fruitful to operationalize similarity as Shaver did, by creating bogus attitude questionnaires. While subjects did perceive themselves as similar or dissimilar to the victim, it may have been based only in status and age, not

necessarily in attitudes or beliefs. In addition, it would be helpful to look at stereotypes such as "macho" men, "wimps", and "tough" women and see if we get any differences in attributions based on these stereotypes.

In sum, it seems that subjects may be more willing to weigh situational variables than originally thought, although this liberalism is tempered with definite sex role ideals that limit the attributional generosity of the observer. It appears that subjects do try very hard to be objective about attributional decisions, but may fall into sex role traps without realizing it. Perhaps by calling attention to these sex role biases, we can help observers to move past them and see the person.

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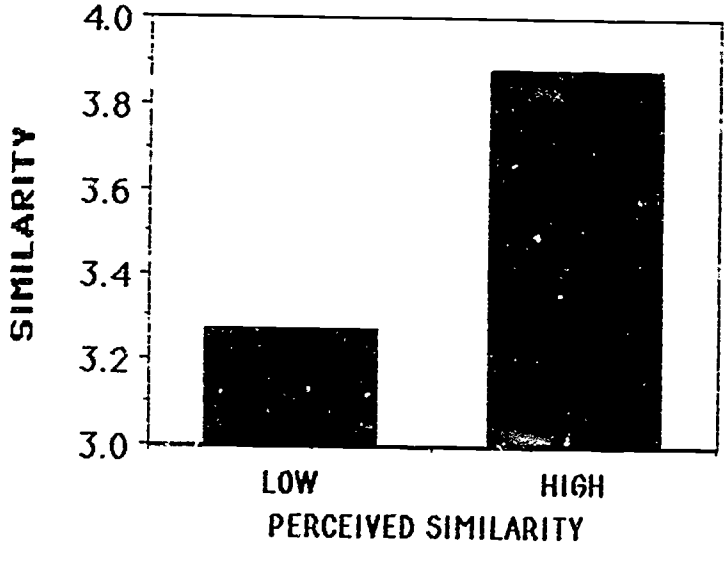
Figure 1. Manipulation check.



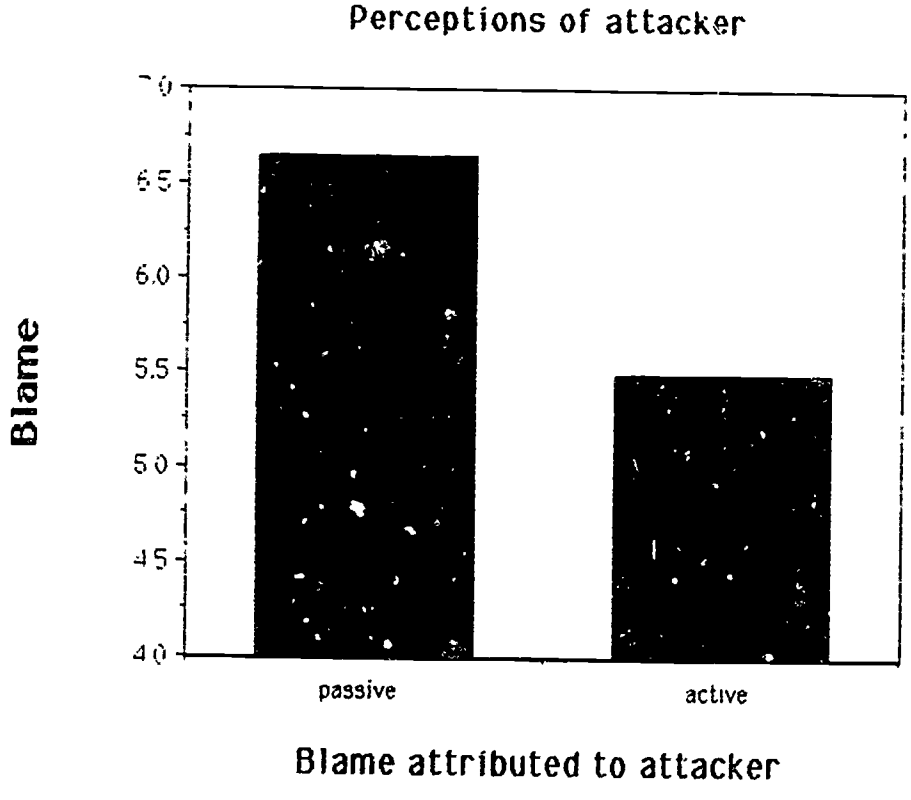

Perceptions of attacker
Blame
6.5
6.0
5.5
5.0
4.5
4.0
passive
active
Blame attributed to attacker

Figure 2. Perceptions of Crime